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SUBJECT: SEOUL - PRESS BULLETIN; August 05, 2009

TOP HEADLINES

Chosun Ilbo, All TVs
Bill Clinton Delivers "Obama Message" to Kim Jong-il

JoongAng Ilbo
Excited Pyongyang... Prudent Washington

Dong-a Ilbo, Hankook Ilbo, Segye Ilbo, Seoul Shinmun
Clinton Makes Surprise Visit to N. Korea... Meets Kim Jong-il

Hankyoreh Shinmun
Clinton Discusses "Issues of Common Interest" with Kim Jong-il

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

According to North Korea's state-run media, former President Bill Clinton made a surprise visit to North Korea yesterday and met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. The North's state-run media noted that the former U.S. president discussed "issues of common interest" with the North Korean leader and delivered oral messages from President Obama to Kim. (All)

White House Spokesman Robert Gibbs, however, denied that the North received oral messages from President Obama, saying: "That wasn't true." (Chosun, JoongAng, Hankook, Segye)

Former President Clinton's primary mission to Pyongyang is apparently to free the two U.S. journalists, who have been detained in the North for 141 days. Clinton's presence may have an impact on political issues, including the North's nuclear issue and improved relations between the U.S. and North Korea. (All)

MEDIA ANALYSIS

Former President Clinton's Visit to N. Korea
Former President Bill Clinton's surprise visit to North Korea yesterday received top play in the ROK media. Meanwhile, according

to Yonhap News, citing North Korean media, the former U.S. President departed Pyongyang today with two U.S. journalists who have been held for 141 days since they were arrested on March 17, after North Korean leader Kim Jong-il granted a special pardon to the journalists.

Most ROK media focused their coverage on yesterday's reports by North Korea's state-run media that the former U.S. President met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to discuss "issues of common interest" and delivered oral messages from President Obama to the North Korean leader. However, according to media reports, White House Spokesman Robert Gibbs denied that North Korea received such messages, saying: "That wasn't true."

The ROK media also observed that former President Clinton's primary mission to Pyongyang was apparently to free the U.S. journalists but that the political weight Clinton carries as a former U.S. president and as the husband of the incumbent Secretary of State has given rise to speculation that he was on a broader mission to find a breakthrough on issues, such as the North Korean nuclear problem and improved relations between the two countries.

Conservative Chosun Ilbo, in an inside-page article entitled "'The Door of Dialogue' on the Edge of a Precipice... Are the U.S., N. Korea Heading Toward Comprehensive Negotiations?" raised the possibility that Washington may have proposed a comprehensive package to North Korea. The report also cited some ROK analysts as commenting that it would not be easy for the two countries to

SEOUL 00001235 002 OF 010

improve bilateral ties, given the North's unwillingness to give up its nuclear ambitions.

In an accompanying article, Chosun also wondered whether Clinton's visit will lead to the release of an ROK worker who has been held incommunicado in the North for 128 days. An ROKG official was quoted as saying: "There has been no news directly from North Korea, but we have high expectations that the detention issue will also be resolved in the not-so-distant future once the American journalists are released."

Newspapers carried the following inside-page headlines: "U.S., North Korea Explores Solution but the Two Koreas? ... ROKG Concerned" (right-of-center JoongAng Ilbo); "Clinton Has Unprecedented Dinner and Amicable Dialogue with Kim Jong-il... Will Rapid Progress Be Made in U.S.-North Korea Relations?" (conservative Dong-a Ilbo); and "Chilly Summer for the Two Koreas... Will Seoul Be Left Out in the Cold?" (moderate Hankook Ilbo)

- Editorial Comments

Conservative Chosun Ilbo editorialized: "The Clinton-Kim Jong-il meeting is a sign that direct talks between the U.S. and North Korea have effectively started, after the North's second nuclear test and its long-range missile launch. It is only a matter of time before the two countries start bilateral negotiations. ... Clinton's visit to the North has also disclosed the limitations of sanctions against North Korea through the UN."

Right-of-center JoongAng Ilbo editorialized: "We truly hope that Mr. Clinton's visit will serve as a turning point in comprehensively resolving the North Korean nuclear issue by changing the situation from confrontation to dialogue. (The U.S.), however, should not repeat the past mistake of dancing to the North's tune while only seeking dialogue with the communist state. Accordingly, (the U.S.) needs to, for a while, maintain a two-track strategy toward North Korea of tougher sanctions and dialogue. Furthermore, the U.S. should closely consult with its allies, such as the ROK and Japan, under the principle that North Korea possessing nuclear weapons can not be tolerated."

Moderate Hankook Ilbo's editorial stated: "Former President Clinton is the highest-ranking of the officials who have been mentioned as possible special envoys to negotiate the release of the U.S. journalists. In other words, Clinton's visit has greatly saved the North's face. By taking corresponding measures in return, North

Korea should not miss this good opportunity to get out of international sanctions and isolation."

Left-leaning Hankyoreh Shinmun editorialized: "The problem is the Lee Myung-bak Administration's attitude. The Lee Administration has plunged inter-Korean relations to its worst level by pushing for a hard-line policy toward North Korea. Now is the time for the Lee Administration to face up to the rapidly changing environment and to quit the hard-line policy that has contributed only to the ROK being excluded from discussions on Korean Peninsula issues."

OPINIONS/EDITORIALS

PREPARE FOR RAMIFICATIONS FROM CLINTON'S N.KOREA VISIT
(Chosun Ilbo, August 5, 2009, page 35)

Former U.S. president Bill Clinton has won the release of two American journalists held in North Korea with a surprise visit to the Stalinist country. His wife, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, had stated a few times in the past that negotiations for the American journalists' release is one thing and that the North Korean nuclear issue quite another.

It will be difficult for Washington to conduct nuclear disarmament talks with the North and invalidate the very UN sanctions on the North it has lobbied so hard to implement. If it negotiates with

SEOUL 00001235 003 OF 010

Pyongyang, the U.S. would have to do so within the framework of Six-Party Talks, and will find it difficult to abandon the recently established principle of not rewarding the North for just returning to the negotiation table.

But Clinton's visit must have come with the blessing of President Barack Obama, and chances are that Clinton carried a personal letter of message addressed to Kim Jong-il from Obama. The message will not just have mentioned the two journalists. Obama sent the most prominent American he could possibly send. The Clinton-Kim Jong-il meeting is a sign that direct talks between the U.S. and North Korea have effectively started, after the North's second nuclear test and its long-range missile launch. It is only a matter of time before the two countries start bilateral negotiations.

Clinton's visit recalls Jimmy Carter's in 1994. Visiting the North amid the first nuclear crisis, Carter reversed the situation by lifting U.S. sanctions on the North and achieving an inter-Korean summit. But it merely eased the tension for a while and did not touch upon fundamental issues. The North has since carried out two nuclear tests and now even behaves like a nuclear power. That gives rise to fears that Clinton's visit might repeat the pattern.

Hearing the news of Clinton's Pyongyang visit, many may feel perplexed and even betrayed by the U.S. But the development is merely a manifestation of the dynamics of international politics, which are nothing but the pursuit of national interests. The ROK will have to look at the situation coolly and realistically. What the U.S. fears most is for terrorist organizations hostile to it to acquire nuclear weapons from North Korea. Removing the danger is the top U.S. priority. It is needless to ask what Washington will choose if its national interests clash with the ROK's position.

Clinton's visit to the North has also disclosed the limitations of sanctions against North Korea through the UN. In matters concerning the ROK's national interest, we should harbor no illusion about UN authority. So long as North Korea has an ally in China, it will not fear war, and sanctions against the North cannot be effective.

The U.S. and North Korea will, at some point, sit at a negotiation table. In the negotiations, the North Korean nuclear issue will be discussed along with the entire question of the Korean Peninsula, and the agenda will include the replacement of the armistice with a peace agreement. And the peace accord is directly linked to the presence of the U.S. Forces Korea.

It cannot be ruled out that Obama himself will visit Pyongyang for a summit within a few years. In that process, the North will attempt to freeze the ROK out. The ROK was already sidestepped in the 1994 Geneva accords between the U.S. and North Korea. Washington may have notified Seoul of Clinton's Pyongyang visit in advance, but it's doubtful if the visit was preceded by full cooperation with Seoul.

If Washington-Pyongyang negotiations can denuclearize the North and guarantee a complete peace on the Korean Peninsula, there is no reason why we should not welcome them. But if the process leads to the North being recognized as a nuclear power, we must resist it as strongly as we can.

The question is what we can do. The government should assure the public that it is making adequate preparations for all possible scenarios. National unity is essential. A specific diplomatic strategy comes next.

When Carter visited the North, Kim Il-sung said, "We have neither the intention nor the ability to develop nuclear weapons." Twelve years later, the North tested a nuclear device. The chief U.S. nuclear negotiator at the time Robert Gallucci said, "We've been completely deceived." We have to watch whether Clinton's North Korea visit will replicate that disaster, and prepare for any ramifications with a cool head.

SEOUL 00001235 004 OF 010

CLINTON'S VISIT TO NORTH KOREA COULD BREAK NUCLEAR DEADLOCK
(Hankyoreh Shinmun, August 5, 2009, page 31)

Amid a downward spiral in North Korea-U.S. relations since the launch of the Barack Obama Administration, former President Bill Clinton's surprise visit to North Korea yesterday has grabbed the world's attention. The visit's official purpose is to bring home the two U.S. reporters being detained in North Korea, but the world is watching to see if any improvements in the nuclear talks and the North Korea-U.S. relationship are also made.

Clinton's visit is of interest in two regards. First, as a former president and husband to the current U.S. Secretary of State, he is considered to be a figure that exercises great influence over the foreign policy of the Obama Administration. Moreover, Clinton has the strongest record, out of all of the U.S. presidents who have served, of bringing North Korea-U.S. relations close to normalization. Both the 1994 Geneva Accords that resolved the first nuclear crisis and the October 12 Joint Communiqué that fundamentally changed the framework for North Korea-U.S. relations were concluded during his presidency.

Second, experience has shown that prior nuclear deadlocks between North Korea and the U.S. were broken after the U.S. sent high-ranking figures to North Korea. The most representative example of this was during the nuclear crisis in 1994, when former President Jimmy Carter brought about a turning point in resolving the crisis through talks in Pyongyang with North Korean leader Kim Il-sung. Observers are saying Clinton's visit, in comparison, has been more closely coordinated with the U.S. Administration, which lends it more weight.

Both North Korea and the U.S. are currently keeping quiet about the details of Clinton's visit, but experts say it could serve as a crucial opportunity in changing U.S. policy on North Korea from one of pressure to dialogue. They say whether that dialogue takes place within the framework of the Six-Party Talks or within a separate framework will still be an issue, but regardless, the visit signals that North Korea-U.S. dialogue will begin in earnest. In fact, before the visit took place, the two countries engaged in attempts to resolve the nuclear deadlock through the New York channel. In particular, ever since Kurt Campbell assumed the position of Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs in June, the U.S. has appeared to be open to the possibilities of a potential policy shift while preparing a "comprehensive package" acceptable to North Korea. North Korea, on its part, has been

refraining from engaging in provocative actions.

The problem is the Lee Myung-bak Administration's attitude. The Lee Administration has plunged inter-Korean relations to its worst level by pushing for a hard-line policy toward North Korea. Now is the time for the Lee Administration to face up to the rapidly changing environment and to quit the hard-line policy that has contributed only to the ROK being excluded from discussions on Korean Peninsula issues.

EXPECTATIONS AND CONCERNS OVER CLINTON-KIM JONG-IL MEETING
(JoongAng Ilbo, August 5, 2009, Page 34)

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton paid a surprise visit to Pyongyang yesterday and met with North Korea's National Defense Committee Chairman Kim Jong-il. The North Korean media reported that they had substantive talks about matters of mutual concern. Mr. Clinton's visit is the second time that a former U.S. President has headed to North Korea, after former U.S. President Jimmy Carter visited there during the first nuclear crisis in 1994. While looking at another "surprise show" of U.S.-North Korea relations, we feel complicated because there are both expectations and concerns about the Clinton-Kim Jong-il meeting.

As the White House Spokesman said, the official purpose of Mr. Clinton's visit is to negotiate the release of the two U.S. female journalists detained in the North for five months. The journalists,

SEOUL 00001235 005 OF 010

Euna Lee and Laura Ling, were arrested on March 17 by North Korean soldiers while reporting from the border between North Korea and China and were sentenced last month to 12 years of hard labor for illegal entry and committing hostilities against the North. It is a severe punishment beyond common sense. We expect that Mr. Clinton's visit will lead to the safe return of the journalists and will also serve as an opportunity for Pyongyang to free an ROK employee of the Kaesong Industrial Complex - who has been held in the North for five months - and the crew members of the ROK fishing vessel "Yeonan," which was seized in the East Sea (Sea of Japan) last week.

The reason why we cannot help paying close attention to Mr. Clinton's visit, despite the USG's position of keeping the humanitarian issue separate from the North Korean nuclear issue, is due to the weight that the former U.S. President carries, not to mention the gravity of the situation. While uncertainty was growing in the North Korean regime due to Kim's health problem and the succession issue, Pyongyang pushed the situation on the Korean Peninsula to the edge by conducting a second nuclear test and test-firing a barrage of missiles. In response, the U.S., along with the international community, has been strengthening sanctions against the North. Against this backdrop, the U.S. and North Korea had closed-door negotiations about the release of the female journalists, and it was highly meaningful that the two sides agreed that such a political heavyweight as Mr. Clinton should visit Pyongyang. While pressuring the North, the U.S. has also dangled a comprehensive package of incentives to persuade it to take irreversible steps toward denuclearization. North Korea, for its part, has raised a need for U.S.-North Korea high-level talks.

We truly hope that Mr. Clinton's visit will serve as a turning point in comprehensively resolving the North Korean nuclear issue by changing the situation from confrontation to dialogue. (The U.S.), however, should not repeat the past mistake of dancing to the North's tune while only seeking dialogue with the communist state. Accordingly, (the U.S.) needs to, for a while, maintain a two-track strategy toward North Korea of tougher sanctions and dialogue. Furthermore, the U.S. should closely consult with its allies, such as the ROK and Japan, under the principle that North Korea possession nuclear weapons cannot be tolerated.

The ROKG should calmly look at the current situation and lay the foundation for breaking the deadlock in inter-Korean ties. It should also carefully analyze the outcome of Mr. Clinton's visit through close cooperation with Washington, and, if necessary, should consider making a bold proposal for a turnaround in relations with

the North through the President's congratulatory speech on the August 15 Liberation Day.

PAYING ATTENTION TO SITUATION FOLLOWING CLINTON-KIM JONG-IL MEETING
(Hankook Ilbo, August 5, 2009, page 31)

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton arrived in North Korea yesterday on a special flight and met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. It appears that he made a private visit to negotiate the release of two U.S. female journalists, who have been detained in North Korea. However, since he is a prominent figure and the visit is symbolically important, the purpose of his visit may not be just to free the two journalists. In 1994, during the first North Korean nuclear crisis, former President Jimmy Carter visited North Korea to achieve a breakthrough. We hope that Clinton's visit will serve as a dramatic turning point for U.S.-North Korean relations to change from confrontation to dialogue.

Of course, we should avoid hasty optimism. North Korea has not changed its basic position to achieve the status of a nuclear state. Also, North Korea still faces international sanctions and pressure due to its second nuclear test and long-range rocket launches. Some observers point out, reasonably, that a one-time meeting between the former U.S. President and current North Korean leader will not ease the standoff between the U.S. and North Korea. This is why the U.S. government has underscored the need to separate the journalists' detention from political issues.

SEOUL 00001235 006 OF 010

However, it is indisputable that the visit by former President Bill Clinton, who is the husband of the incumbent Secretary of State in charge of U.S. diplomacy, will likely serve as a starting point to change U.S. policy on North Korea. It is well known that while in office, former President Clinton made efforts to fundamentally resolve the North Korean nuclear and missile issue. Clinton reached the Geneva Agreed Framework with North Korea in 1994 and tried to visit Pyongyang in 2000. Since it seems that Clinton held wide-ranging discussions with Kim Jong-il on pending issues, this is likely to bring an improvement in negotiations regarding the normalization of diplomatic relations. Another good sign is that he (possibly) delivered President Obama's verbal message to Kim Jong-il.

Former President Clinton is the highest-ranking of the officials who have been mentioned as possible special envoys to negotiate the release of the U.S. journalists. In other words, Clinton's visit has greatly saved the North's face. By taking corresponding measures in return, North Korea should not miss this good opportunity to get out of international sanctions and isolation. If North Korea returns to the ROK, both Hyundai Asan-employee Mr. Yoo, and the ROK ship it seized last week, this could serve as a dramatic breakthrough. The ROKG should carefully watch any change in U.S.-North Korea relations following Clinton's meeting with Kim Jong-il and make sure that this situation is used to our advantage to improve strained inter-Korean relations.

FEATURES

1N. KOREA FREES U.S. REPORTERS AFTER BILL CLINTON VISIT
(Chosun Ilbo, August 5, 2009, pages 1 and 3: EXCERPTS)

By Reporter Lim Min-hyuk

Former U.S. president Bill Clinton has won the freedom of two American journalists who were sentenced to hard labor in North Korea. Clinton went on a surprise visit to Pyongyang on Tuesday to win the release of Euna Lee and Laura Ling, who have been held for 141 days since they were arrested on March 17 while working at the China-North Korea border near the Duman (or Tumen) River. Press reports said the two journalists were traveling back to the U.S. with Clinton.

The North Korean state media said Clinton and his entourage arrived in Pyongyang by air on Tuesday. North Korean leader Kim Jong-il met with Clinton and received a "verbal message" from U.S. President Barack Obama, they said. They added that Kim later pardoned the two reporters and ordered their release.

The political weight Clinton carries as a former U.S. president and as the husband of the incumbent Secretary of State has given rise to speculation that he was on a broader mission to find a breakthrough in Washington-Pyongyang relations.

An ROK government official earlier indicated most of the behind-the-scenes negotiations for the journalists' release had been finished before Clinton's trip, saying U.S. and North Korean officials held "intimate talks" through the North's UN mission in New York until Clinton's visit to the North materialized.

ROK and U.S. government officials are stressing that Clinton visited the North as a private citizen. The U.S. has maintained the principle that it is necessary to separate the journalists' detention, a humanitarian issue, from political issues including the North Korean nuclear problem.

But experts doubt that such a prominent figure would only play a simple role in securing the journalists' release. Prof. Kim Yong-hyun of Dongguk University said, "Clinton's visit to the North is a big event that can turn the current mode of confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang into a mode of dialogue. We should

SEOUL 00001235 007 OF 010

view his visit as the beginning of overall change in the U.S. policy toward North Korea."

Experts speculate that the North Korean media's quick reporting on the visit shows how eagerly the North expected something bigger from his visit than a mere ransom for the journalists.

Experts point out that the North rejected U.S. proposals for visits by the special representative for North Korea policy, Stephen Bosworth, former U.S. vice president Al Gore, or New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, because it wanted someone more prominent.

Yun Duk-min, a professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, said earlier that if Clinton met with Kim, "there is a high probability that the North Korean nuclear talks will resume." The ROK official said the meeting between the two would allow the North to convey its position on the nuclear issue directly to the U.S. government.

BILL CLINTON MAKES S-E-C-R-E-T NORTH TRIP
(JoongAng Daily, August 5, 2009)

By Correspondent Choi Sang-hyun and Reporter Lee Young-jong

Mission involves the release of jailed journalists

Former United States President Bill Clinton arrived in North Korea's capital city of Pyongyang yesterday in a bid to negotiate the release of two American journalists detained since March.

North Korea's state-run media reported during their noon news shows that Yang Hyong-sop, vice president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, and Kim Gye-gwan, vice-minister of Foreign Affairs, greeted Clinton at Sunan Airport.

Although North Korean media reported some details, such as Clinton receiving a welcome bouquet from a little girl at the airport, the reports did not specify the purpose of his trip. Whether Clinton will meet the North's leader, Kim Jong-il, remains unclear.

No announcement about the trip was made by the U.S. government until 9 p.m. yesterday.

"While this solely private mission to secure the release of two Americans is on the ground, we will have no comment," said White

House spokesman Robert Gibbs in a statement. We do not want to jeopardize the success of former President Clinton's mission."

The U.S. Embassy in Seoul also declined to comment earlier in the day. Although a Korean-language interpreter from the embassy was captured on TV news upon Clinton's arrival at the airport, U.S. diplomats in Seoul were tight-lipped, insisting that they have no information on the trip.

While working on a story about North Korean defectors at the Chinese border, Euna Lee and Laura Ling - both reporters for California-based Current TV - were arrested by the North on March 17 on charges of illegal border crossing. The North's Central Court put the two on trial on June 4 and convicted both of them for committing grave crimes and slander against the North Korean people. They were each sentenced on June 8 to 12 years at a labor camp.

Lisa Ling, the sister of Laura Ling, was quoted by U.S. media yesterday saying that the family did not want to comment on the Clinton trip. "Everything is just so delicate," she said to the Los Angeles Times. "We're going to wait it out a while longer. We're on pins and needles."

The newspaper also reported that a U.S. official, who declined to be identified, said the Clintons were approached by the journalists' families when it became clear that Pyongyang would permit the former president to travel to the North.

SEOUL 00001235 008 OF 010

Clinton's trip came after his wife, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, publicly pleaded for the release of the women last month. Diplomatic sources have said the North requested a high-profile figure to pay a visit to discuss the fate of Lee and Ling and that Washington and Pyongyang talked about the possibility through diplomatic channels in New York.

On July 24, Sin Sun-ho, North Korean ambassador to the United Nations, held a rare media conference and said his government was interested in direct talks with the Barack Obama Administration on issues of "common concern."

An ROK government official said last week that Washington and Pyongyang had struck a deal through direct and indirect contacts that the two journalists were to be granted amnesty. "It was just a matter of who will visit North Korea and when," the source said at the time.

Clinton is the second former U.S. President to visit North Korea. Only days after North Korea walked out of the International Atomic Energy Agency to push forward with its nuclear arms programs in 1994, former President Jimmy Carter traveled to Pyongyang and met with then-North Korean leader Kim Il-sung.

At the time, Clinton was serving his first presidential term, and tensions between Washington and Pyongyang had reached a breaking point. Carter's trip changed the situation dramatically, and the Clinton Administration signed the Geneva agreement with Pyongyang later that year to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula.

During his presidency, Clinton also considered visiting the North himself, although no such trip took place while he was in office.

With Clinton's trip, optimism prevailed yesterday that the two American journalists would be released.

While the Lee Myung-bak Administration did not issue an official comment on the trip, a Unification Ministry official said it was extraordinary for the North's media to air reports about Clinton's visit so fast. "Unless Kim Jong-il greets a visitor such as the Presidents of China and Russia, it is rare that the reports are aired fast," the official said. "This means Pyongyang is putting importance on his visit."

Clinton reportedly arrived at the airport around 10:48 a.m., and the North's media reported the news in less than two hours. He also

flew directly from the United States to North Korea, not passing through the ROK or China, according to U.S. media reports.

Experts are optimistic about Clinton's trip. Noting that Clinton commands respect in North Korea, Victor Cha, a Georgetown University professor who served as a Bush Administration adviser on North Korea, was quoted as saying by U.S. media that it is possible that no agreement was prearranged for Lee and Ling's release. "But it would be very difficult for the North not to give these people up" to a former U.S. president, he said.

Others agreed. "Clinton will not go home empty-handed," said Liu Jiangyong, a professor of international relations at the Institute of International Studies at China's Tsinghua University, calling the trip a positive sign and an important breakthrough in U.S.-North Korea relations.

Although some spoke about expectations that stalled U.S.-North Korea relations may ease and that Pyongyang may return to the deadlocked Six-Party denuclearization talks, it was unclear whether Clinton would discuss security issues aside from the reporters' release. In June, the U.S. State Department made clear that the reporters' detention and the nuclear crisis are two separate matters.

Tensions in the region have intensified since North Korea fired a barrage of missiles and conducted a second nuclear test earlier this year. The North has also threatened to test an inter-continental ballistic missile and restart its frozen nuclear program.

SEOUL 00001235 009 OF 010

It is also not clear how the situation will influence the ROK government's efforts to free its citizens held in the North. Inter-Korean relations have hit their lowest point in years, ever since the Lee Administration took office in February of last year.

An ROK worker at the Kaesong Industrial Complex has been detained in the communist country since April on charges of defaming the North's administration. Then on July 30, an ROK fishing boat with four crew members strayed north of the border and was tugged away by a North Korean patrol boat.

Pyongyang has snubbed a series of requests by Seoul to discuss these issues.

ROK SHOULD NOT BE LEFT OUT AMID SUDDEN IMPROVEMENT IN U.S.-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS
(OhmyNews, August 5, 2009)

North Korea has sought to bypass the ROK government now and in the past, particularly, the conservative ones, in its efforts to improve relations with the U.S. In 1993, during the first North Korean nuclear crisis, the Kim Young-sam Government rejected inter-Korean talks when U.S.-North Korea dialogue was making progress. This led to the ROKG wielding less influence (over the North Korean issue) and paying for the North Korean light-water reactor project, following the signing of the Geneva Agreed Framework.

Now that the former U.S. President has visited North Korea to pursue dialogue with North Korea, it will be hard for the U.S. to put much emphasis on the U.S.-ROK alliance in the face of North Korea's attempt to bypass the ROK. We should not forget the grim reality that even though the Japanese government, (the U.S.'s) key ally in Northeast Asia, voiced opposition to the Six-Party Talks (in the past), citing the reason that the issue of Japanese abductees should be resolved (first), the U.S. reached the October 3 agreement with North Korea.

Tensions, which have been escalating (on the Korean Peninsula) in recent months, stem from confrontation between the U.S. and North Korea. However, amid the worsening situation on the Korean Peninsula, North Korea has shunned military clashes in inter-Korean relations. But if the Lee Myung-bak Government rejects ROK-North Korea talks, as the Kim Young-sam Government did, it is very likely that things will make an abrupt turn when (the mood for) U.S.-North

Korea talks are improving. I think that North Korea will be very likely to resort to military provocations against the ROK, such as naval clashes in the West Sea, going beyond a war of rhetoric when using phrases like "sea of fire." North Korea's reaction to the Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG), a U.S.-ROK joint exercise, which will take place from August 17 to 27, may signal which approach the North has taken and which options the ROK should take.

The two Koreas, which have lost trust in each other, are now undergoing a long cooling-off period. The Lee Myung-bak Administration is following the previous Kim Young-sam Administration's misjudgment that North Korea will soon collapse and the Bush Administration's misjudgment that the North can be brought to its knees through sanctions. As long as the Lee Administration maintains its current position toward the North-in which a true North Korea policy is missing and only a response to Pyongyang's policy towards the South exists - we are in more of a crisis than ever before.

If former U.S. President Clinton's visit is successfully concluded, a likely "package of gifts" (that the former President will bring with him from the North) will include a proposal to the ROK, just as former President Carter's "gifts" included a proposal for an inter-Korean summit. Depending on what decision the ROKG makes, Seoul could either bring on a thaw in inter-Korean ties or put a worse strain on the relationship, thereby inviting isolation.

Fortunately, the ROKG expressed a willingness to resume humanitarian

SEOUL 00001235 010 OF 010

aid to the North - which has been on hold since the second nuclear test - by approving the application of a private aid group (World Vision) for a visit to the North on July 31, and by approving a plan on August 3 to provide 3.4 billion won to ROK aid groups. This will be the first time after Pyongyang's second nuclear test on May 25 that a private aid group will be allowed to enter North Korea. . However, these gestures are not enough. Seoul's humanitarian food aid and a proactive proposal for dialogue are necessary. The Lee Administration should seriously consider making these proposals through the President's August 15 Liberation Day speech.

If dialogue is wrapped up as submission, and confrontation and sanctions are wrapped up as a political victory, the ROKG's influence over the Korean Peninsula will inevitably weaken further. Since its inauguration, the Lee Administration has advocated practical diplomacy. If Seoul still adheres to this doctrine, now is the time to carry out its "practical diplomacy" from a strategic perspective.

STEPHENS